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Reclaiming Fat, Reclaiming Femme

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Reclaiming Fat, Reclaiming Femme

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Report

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Dedication

Dedicated to my fellow queer fat femmes with whom I've been so lucky to find a fiercely radical and loving community.

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Abstract

Reclaiming Fat, Reclaiming Femme

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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The aim of this essay is to discuss some of the shared legacies of oppression between queerness, femininity, and fatness in order to theorize a form of activism that can do justice to these intersecting identities. A key component of this is to discuss the complexities of negotiating the shame and pride that go hand in hand with stigmatized identities, a project recently taken up by queer theorists that has yet to be well represented in fat studies or activist circles. This essay will engage with conversations happening in queer theory and fat studies about shame as it relates to the politics of attachment. I hope to begin a conversation about how to organize effective activist circles that can do justice to queer fat femmes' complex relationships with visibility, embodiment and community building.

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Introduction: What's Queer about Fat?

Queer women have played important and prominent roles in fat activism since the beginning of the fat liberation movement in the early 1970's. Adrienne Hill, in her thesis, "Spatial Awarishness: Queer Women and the Politics of Fat Embodiment" charts the legacy of queer women's involvement and participation in fat activism. She notes that today, a number of key players in fat activism and scholarship are queer identified and even other well-known fat activists, who don't identify as queer in terms of their gender or sexual identities, identify deeply with queerness and queer politics. For example, Marilyn Wann of the 1990's fat acceptance zine, "Fat!So?", identifies as a "politically queer straight chick" (Hill 1). Adopting queer politics gestures towards the legacy of queer women and queer strategies within the fat activist movement. The arguably nascent field of fat studies was, in many ways, founded by dykes as one of its foundational texts, "Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression" was primarily written by queer women (1-2). In the UK, prominent fat activists and scholars Charlotte Cooper and Francis Ray White (among many others) first connected with one another through queer feminist circles. Although the presence and importance of queer dykes in fat activism has been widely noted and accepted, many fat scholars fail to explore *why* these two communities are so interconnected. Le'a Kent notes in "Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women" that the connections between queer activism, feminist activism, and fat activism continue to the present day (Kent 138). This declaration is commonplace in fat scholarship but queer women's motivation and desire to participate

in fat activism has rarely been discussed further than this (Hill 4). The aim of this essay is to discuss some of the shared legacies of oppression between queerness, femininity, and fatness in order to theorize a form of activism that can do justice to these intersecting identities. A key component of this is to discuss the complexities of negotiating the shame and pride that go hand in hand with stigmatized identities, a project recently taken up by queer theorists that in my opinion hasn't been represented enough in fat studies or activist circles.

First, it might be useful to clarify what I mean when I refer to "fat activism." Fat scholars define fat activism or the fat "acceptance" movement as a social and academic movement aimed at working against anti-fat biases and deconstructing the ways in which fat people are culturally positioned as abject, excessive, and undesirable (Brazier 2001, Kent 2001, Hill 2008). Fat activists work to end the social, economic, and legal discrimination against fat people and are largely concerned with exposing the weight-loss industry as not only predatory and body shaming, but as one that is an unfounded and ultimately ineffective assault on the fat body (Hill 3, Kent 138). Seemingly, the fact that queer women, many of whom are femme, constitute a large number of this community suggests that there is something about queers that would characterize them as more receptive to activism that concerns the body. Queer women may be more invested in activism that reconfigures non-normative bodies—ie the fat, queer female body—as both oppressed and desirable (Hill 2).

It is surprising that there has been so little scholarly work on the intersections between fatness and queerness, because the writings of many fat studies scholars have

assumed that fatness is deeply and intrinsically connected to queerness. Prominent queer fat scholar Kathleen LeBesco, for instance, makes this claim in “Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity,” when she explains that because of fatness’ vexed relationship to sexuality, the sexual fat body is inherently queer:

Queer acceptance/activism and fat acceptance/activism have much in common, given that fatness may be read as a mere subset of queerness. Because fat people are not supposed to be sexy or sexual, ‘any sex involving a fat person is by definition ‘queer,’ no matter what the genders of any partners involved’ (Lebesco 88-89).

Acting on sexual desires that deviate from established norms, or making visible the sexuality of bodies that are categorized as undesirable is a revolutionary act. It requires us to desire through and despite of stigma, and to actively challenge the oppressive beauty standards that police sexuality. This is why I believe there is great potential in exploring some of the possibilities for activism that can take place at the intersections of queer-fat-femme.

However, that is not to say that queer and fat folks experience oppression in the same way. Some scholars such as Ganapati Durgadas argue that queer women, specifically, experience less fatphobia in their social circles. Although the resignification of the fat body as queer and subversive may facilitate body positivity and body acceptance for some queer fat folks (Hill 5), LeBesco argues that the queering of fat bodies, in other ways, conceals the ambivalent relationship between fatness and queer communities. She states, “despite Durgada’s implication that fat women might be more popular in lesbian scenes because of their perceived strength, one only needs to peruse

the personal ads of the local progressive weekly to see this is not necessarily the truth” (LeBesco 89).

Vivian F. Mayer, a prominent fat activist praises the work of lesbian and queer feminists in the movement but quickly clarifies that “the expectation [that fat women would be liberated under lesbian feminism] was satisfied up to a point. That point came when fat women sought lovers among other women. Then the “support” of slim lesbian feminists often revealed itself to be liberalism that easily turned into rejection” (Mayer xiv). This demonstrates that the link between queerness and fatness is maybe not intrinsic as fat scholars have suggested given the link is neither universally recognized nor accepted among dykes and queer communities (Hill 5). However, what is more widely agreed upon, as LeBesco notes, is that within fat-accepting communities, queer women tend to “radically politicize” the lived experience of being fat in a culture that constantly shames and polices all—and especially—fat bodies (LeBesco 90).

These tensions make theorizing a form of intersectional activism between queer femme and fat communities a risky move. I nonetheless believe it is an important move to make if we are to build community spaces that are less violent. With this in mind, I turn to a discussion of femme activism and discourse and the connection between fatness and femme queerness. “Queer fat femme” includes a number of identity positions specific to dyke communities today. Fat activism and butch-femme politics have surfaced and resurfaced in some dyke communities today (Hill 3). Femme activists are working to divorce femme and butch while seeking ways to rethink femme identity “as a femininity that is transgressive, disruptive, and chosen” as opposed to butch’s normatively-gendered

counterpart (Harris 3, quoted in Hill 5). For the large number of fat femme activists, “the identity ‘queer fat femme’ provides a productive means for addressing both femmes’ and fat people’s troubled relationships with the politics of visibility” (Hill 3). Femme history indicates a troubled relationship to visibility similar to that of fat people and of queer people more generally. Queer fat femmes manipulate the language of visibility in order to reconstitute their fatness as a visual marker of their queer femininity. In the process, they challenge misogynist rhetoric that position femininity as passive, animalistic, hypersexualized and controlled by bodily appetites, doing so by privileging personal empowerment and community-building (19).

This valorization of femme identity and expression has recently increasingly been taken up by queer fat activists as a way of exploring issues of intersectional identities, agency, privilege, and the body as a site of cultural resistance. Several prominent queer fat woman activists identify as queer fat femmes—Austin activist Jessie Dress, Big Burlesque founder Heather MacAllister, based in San Francisco, queer porn performer and founder of NoFauxxx.com Courtney Trouble, and front woman of The Gossip Beth Ditto (48). Seemingly, for many queer fat women, femme discourse and aesthetics provide a means of articulating an activism that incorporates an interrogation and critique of size, gender, and sexuality (48-49).

Well-known fat femme Bevin Branlandingham hosts a podcast based in Brooklyn titled “FemmeCast. ” Bevin’s podcast serves as a “queer fat femme guide to life” and validates queer fat femme as a coherent and viable identity (49). Bevin and other activists explore the ways in which queer fat femmes “deploy the connections between their

sexuality, gender expression, and body size to challenge fatphobia, heterosexism, and misogyny” (49) both within the queer community and outside.

Branlandingham’s podcasts feature “advice, glitter, fat fashion, performance recaps, travel, community building, and sardonic anecdotes from the life of Bevin Branlandingham” (Branlandingham 2008). In her podcasts and on her blog—queerfatfemme.com—Bevin emphasizes the power of community to bring strength to marginalized identities. In this, she believes in giving power to those identities and claiming what has kept one down in the past as part of the journey to loving oneself and making one’s own path, a discourse which is common among other fat femmes. She asserts that there is no one right way to be queer, fat, or femme.

In one of her early podcasts, Branlandingham explains that coming into her identities as fat, queer, and femme was a process. She explains further:

For me I identify as queer because I do not acknowledge a gender binary and most of the people I date don’t identify exclusively (if at all) as women. It also acts as a handy umbrella term to encompass the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community.”

This passage is especially interesting because Branlandingham identifies not only as femme but also as queer, a word which does not acknowledge a gender binary. While there is a history of branding femmes as “regressively” gender-conforming, Branlandingham and other femmes challenge the notion that femininely presenting, female-assigned people necessarily adhere to a gender binary. For femmes, identifying as queer can mark one’s resistance to gender policing and traditional gender roles, while still allowing one to celebrate and delight in gender expression. Branlandingham continues to

speaking about coming into her femme identity:

Femme is a tricky one. Femme is a way of defining for me how I fit into my sexuality, but does not describe my gender. Femme means my feminism and my femininity walk hand in hand. Femme means I look how I want to look and not how someone tells me I should look to be perceived as queer. You'll know I'm queer within about 20 seconds of talking to me. Femme means I look how I want to look and not how someone tells me I should look because I am a woman. I am often far overdressed for everything I do, but when I look in the mirror and smile because I'm wearing a glittery necklace, feathers in my hair, lots of cleavage, that's what matters. Femme means I stand in solidarity with every other self-identified Femme, Butch, and gender warrior out there. **It is about finding a way to be a girl that doesn't hurt...** None of these identities exists in a vacuum. Coming out as fat made being femme possible, which made being queer make more sense to me. Acknowledging an intersectionality of identities—both privileged and marginalized—is very important to me (Branlandingham 2008).

Key to unpacking this quote is Brandlandingham's discussion of an "intersectionality of identities." For her, "coming out" as fat offered her a perspective on deviant types of embodiment that she was otherwise unable to access. It is then possible that the visible queerness of her fat, and a new politicized understanding of it, gave her visibility as a queer femme she otherwise might have lacked. The interplay of visibility versus invisibility, the intersections of Bevin's "privileged and marginalized" identities, creates a complex subject position, so that talking about intersecting identities separately becomes impossible and unproductive.

I also find it important to highlight Branlandingham's claim from above that "Femme means I stand in solidarity with every other self-identified Femme, Butch, and gender warrior out there," because it calls attention to the fact that all stigmatized gender presentations share an understanding—varying as they all may be—of what it means to

inhabit a body in ways “that hurt.” Putting queer fat femme identities into conversation with each other can allow us the opportunity to “find a way to be a girl” (and I would say queer and fat) “that doesn’t hurt.” Both queer and fat identified folks have reclaimed words that have histories of violence and oppression. As Branlandingham explains:

Identifying as **Fat** has a lot to do with the reclamation of a word that has been used to hurt me in the past. I don’t think Fat is a bad thing, I have highly nuanced Fat activist politics and I believe in body autonomy. Bodies come in all sizes, mine happens to be fat, and I have chosen to live my life to the fullest regardless of what the society I was raised in tries to make me believe.

Branlandingham may not have been able to “choose” her body, but this passage indicates that a large part of politicizing her fatness has to do with choosing to imagine it in terms other than the negative stereotypes provided in much of society. In this narrative, her fatness is made radical by her ability to “choose” *pride* over shame. Femme is also a subject position she “chooses” for herself apart from the gender roles and presentations offered to her by society.

The type of queer fat femme discourse present in Bevin’s podcasts, and among other fat femme activists provides an effective and salient way for some queer fat women to positively reframe their fatness and move towards body positivity. This type of activism and discourse also facilitates an individual sense of empowerment and lends itself to locating other queer fat femmes and building a supportive community. However, I believe that body positivity has its limits, and is not enough on its own to make up for the violences that stigmatized individuals have to face on a daily basis. Just as in light of all of the marginalization I live, I do not always feel positive about my body, a fat politics that pretends this to be so wouldn’t be doing justice to the way that oppression feels

(LeBesco 96). This essay will engage with conversations happening in queer theory and fat studies about shame as it relates to politics and attachments. I hope to begin a conversation about how to organize effective activist circles that can do justice to our complex relationships with visibility, embodiment and community building.

In the first chapter, “(Reclaiming) The Body in Western Discourse,” I engage with Susan Bordo to discuss the ways that the mind/body dualism historically perpetuated by Western philosophy attaches immense stigma to the body, and associates women, queers, fat folks and people of color with the “body.” I argue that realizing the fictitious nature of this dualism doesn’t adequately shield one from internalizing this hierarchy to some extent. Its grip on our lives is made more profound by the relationship between visibility and stigma, whereby the means to accessing one identity/community may impede one’s access to another.

Chapter Two, “Reflections on Fat, Femme Visibility and Shame” focuses on the ways in which ambivalences between pride and shame even in those who have reclaimed stigmatized identities structure those modes of embodiment. Because shame is central in the construction of one’s identity (Sedgwick 36), in order to form more productive, intersectional methods of activism the relationship between shame and stigma needs to be explored and theorized. I engage with Sedgwick, Berlant, and LeBesco to analyze shame and its role in the construction of identity.

In the Conclusion, “Theorizing Body-Centered Activisms” I follow these strains of thought out to the realm of activism, asking what it means to incorporate shame in activist communities and tactics without being destroyed by it. I turn to Barry D. Adam

and Heather Love, two theorists who have already begun asking these questions in relationship to queerness, in order to imagine what this might mean for fat, queer femme activists. In doing so, this project aims to carve out rhetorical (theoretical) and material space for fat, queer femmes by emphasizing body-centered forms of activism.

Chapter I. (Reclaiming) The Body in Western Discourse

Susan Bordo begins her book *Unbearable Weight* with a poem titled “The Heavy Bear” by Delmore Schwartz. In this epigraph, Schwartz describes his body as “the inescapable animal that walks with me...Moves where I move, distorting my gesture/ A caricature, a swollen shadow/ A stupid clown of the spirit’s motive” (Bordo 1). This poem, like Bordo’s text, is about the mind/body dualism that is palpable in Western philosophy and culture. However, rather than setting out to debunk this dualism and dismiss its effects on bodies, Bordo is concerned with the ways that this dualism has been internalized, the way that this falsity structures the realities of Western subjects. This is a move I’m sympathetic to, because as a fat, queer femme I’m familiar with the stigma that comes from identifying with the body. I’m also familiar with the ways that it can hurt to identify as separate or apart from the body, as if the way I think and feel are not in direct relation to my experience of embodiment. This dualism is frustrating and harmful in its implications, but also in its grip on the lived existence of Western subjects. In this chapter I’m concerned with looking at the ways that “woman” and “fat” have become synonymous with “body” in the mind/body dualism that privileges the body’s masculinized counterpart, the mind. It’s not my intention to reverse this hierarchy, but to pay attention to the ambivalence it creates in those who are associated with “the body”: female-assigned people, femmes, queers, fat people and people of color.

Bordo describes mind/body dualism as a “double-edged construction...of disjunction and connection, separateness and intimacy” (Bordo 2). Highlighting the

antagonistic nature of the mind of an individual *to* her body that often accompanies this philosophy, she says it can be thought of as “‘The witness of the body’: the body as not ‘me’ but ‘with’ me is at the same time the body that is *inescapably* ‘with me’” (Bordo 2). She continues to argue that within this philosophy, the body is characterized with all that is base and unrefined which has some startling cultural implications. Indeed, when much of Western philosophy, the forces which have shaped our culture, is filled with images of “the body as animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul and confounder of its prospects”, one can hardly expect its impact to be dismissible (Bordo 3). The dualism shifts and problematizes itself over time, but its general hierarchy remains intact. If the body is the site in which all of the “grossness” of uncontrollable physical appetites must be experienced and assuaged, and women have been relegated to the realm of the body in their social roles as caretakers, it only follows that from the time of infancy, through our mother’s fulfillment of our “base” bodily desires, this association has been reified by cultural images and internalized by many Western subjects. The ramifications of this association are myriad and nuanced, but, as Bordo says, “if, for whatever the specific historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death” (Bordo 5). On the other hand, while women are relegated to the realm of the body and are culturally blighted by its negative implications, men have historically been associated with the mind, and the conquering of the base functions and appetites of the body, as exemplified by the image of the paternal figure, standing apart from the

duties of caretaking. This is reflected, in one instance, in advertisements shown in popular media that overarchingly encourage men to indulge in their appetites and implore women to struggle against and overcome them. Thus, Bordo claims that “the extremes to which the anorexic takes the denial of appetite (that is, to the point of starvation) suggest the dualistic nature of her construction of reality: either she transcends the body totally, becoming pure “male” will, or she capitulates utterly to the degraded female body and its disgusting hungers” (Bordo 8).

Though it seems as though the issue of “appetite” may complicate the gender lines of this dualism, Bordo explains the ways appetite is read and presented differently for men and women. She writes of one pervasive trope in particular, the idea that “women are most gratified by feeding and nourishing others, not themselves” (Bordo 118). The common dictum that “men eat and women prepare” (117) is deeply embedded in the gender roles that structure family units. Bordo points out that the “ideal mother” supposedly gets her “fill” from feeding her family. Bordo notes, “when women are positively depicted as sensuously voracious about food (almost never in commercials, and only very rarely in movies and novels), their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for their sexual appetite” (110). Thus women’s hunger, or desire, is presented as only existing in relation to fulfilling another’s desire: the mother/wife desires to nourish her husband and children, and her hunger is depicted as a sexual void to be filled only by a man. Fat women, then, represent an “excess” of bodily pleasure that offends a society built around the pleasure and fulfillment of men. Queer femmes likewise represent an excess in bodily pleasure, and a dedication to sexual “nourishment” that can

be accessed outside of male-bodied and male-privileged forms of sex. Thinking about pleasure outside of male-assigned bodies necessarily challenges this dualism, because its existence depends on a silencing of its ambivalences.

One can see almost immediately how difficult it would be to separate queer, femme, and fat identities: all three of these social locations bear the stigma and weight of bodily appetites and pleasures. They are both constructed as the unfortunate result of a lack of “control,” and an inescapable physicality that men, especially white, cis, straight, thin men, have the luxury of pretending doesn’t apply to them (Bordo 5). Because men are supposed to be rational thinkers as opposed to feelers, their supposed ability to “control” their bodily appetites means that they are in a position of privilege in a culture that values this supposed abstraction and control.

However, these three social locations cannot be conflated. The experience of “feeling” queer, femme, and/or fat intersect and spill over into each other, but in some senses the stigma each identity faces is distinct and unique. For instance, the stigma associated with fatness is different for gay men and gay women. LeBesco quotes Ganapati Durgadas on the ways that fatness “feminizes” gay and bisexual men as opposed to “masculinizing” lesbians: “Fat gay and bisexual men...are less like men and more like women. Fleshy bulk or stoutness in females implies inappropriate strength or toughness. In males, it represents womanlike weakness or physical impressionability. We are reminders of the feminine stigma with which heterosexism still tars queer men” (LeBesco 89). This passage indicates that fatness, in some ways, always transgresses gender roles because neither the “ideal woman” or the “ideal man” are fat. Fat women are

often read as more masculine than their thin counterparts, and fat men are often feminized. Though LeBesco is critical of Durgadas' claim, she notes that fatness is often sexualized in gay male culture and politicized in lesbian communities (90). Though it would be a generalization to argue that this is always the case, I believe this trend of politicized fatness in queer female spaces is caused by the messy interplay of fat versus femme visibility. Those whose deviance is not as visible as others are not as vulnerable to being immediately associated with the negative characteristics that visibly stigmatized individuals are: "animalistic, hypersexual, and overvisible" (LeBesco 86). "Fat" is one of those stigmas that is rarely hidden/hideable, though sometimes it is "lost" for the sake of escaping stigma. Fat bodies are almost constantly "overvisible," their physical deviance from body and gender norms making "passing" as thin difficult when not impossible. LeBesco resists the idea that fat folks are necessarily visible, however, and points to a silence in public conversation about fatness by fat folks as the fat "closet," so to speak, explaining "repentance about one's body forms a metaphorical closet for fat people" (94) and fat folks are often always assumed to be "on-the-way-to-thin" (95). Because fat is so devalued as a mode of being, adopting a politicized fat identity requires an "outing" of one's self-acceptance. Since this is the case, fat visibility is often thought of in terms of body acceptance and pride, and to admit to feeling ashamed of one's body often means being read as "on-the-way-to-thin."

Femmes, on the other hand, often have the privilege of moving through the world as passably "straight" if needed. The stigma that femmes often receive in queer communities is partly a response to this privilege. Femmes (especially femmes that fail to

adequately perform a “queer femme aesthetic”), while not necessarily as exposed to the ready stigmatization of more visibly queer people, are often stigmatized in the queer community. Arguably this stems from a conflation of femmes and the mainstream LGBT movement that privileges the most passable gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. In my view, the scorn that is often targeted at non-visibly queer femmes in queer spaces is both a new misogyny that views the home and domesticity as anti-queer, *and* a pushback against LGBT assimilationist tactics. The issue of fat, queer femme visibility is tarred by these legacies. On the one hand, fat can lend “femme” the visibility she needs to be read as queer, but only because fat masculinizes “femme” to an extent, and marks her as visibly deviant from traditional feminine gender presentations. In other words, fat becomes the mode through which queer femme visibility is achieved, but in a way that still suggests that femininity and queerness do not go hand in hand.

This is continuous with conversations surrounding femme/butch visibility. Because representations of queer femmes have historically been paired with representations of queer butches, femmes’ queerness is only signified or validated when juxtaposed with masculinity. This type of pairing first became visible in the United States in the late 1940s as bars and clubs began to allow women to congregate without male company (Levitt, et al 99). During this time, butch’s masculine appearance conflicted largely femme women’s exaggerated feminine appearance, allowing the couple to “pass” as straight. Femme/Butch couples resembled traditional representations of heterosexual couples and quickly became the norm in lesbian/queer culture. At this moment, lesbianism was signified through a specific, discernable gender representation, thus

marking the butch woman queer and the lone femme woman not. By the 1950s, femme/butch representations became so pervasive that these types of relationships were seen as the only valid queer coupling; butch/butch or femme/femme relationships were (and arguably still are) a rare sighting in the community. It was, in other words, imperative for a lesbian or queer woman to identify as either femme or butch if she wanted to successfully integrate into lesbian culture. At the time, these two genders “were the key structure for organizing against heterosexual dominance” (Levitt et al 100).

Although these couplings were queer, femme/butch relationships were not free from traditional notions of gendered experiences. This gendering “cast butch women as protectors and aggressors and femmes as seductresses and sources of emotional solace within a community geared for resistance” (Levitt et al 99). Femme/butch relationships offered a necessary sense of belonging that helped to shield lesbians and queer women against the harassment and harm that are commonplace. It also offered a system of coupling that structured romantic pairing, in ways similar to the way sex and gender operates within heterosexual contexts. To those outside the community, lesbians and queer women appeared to be mimicking heterosexuality, however, femme/butch identities were, in fact, “very complex, and transcended and radicalized traditional gender roles. By appropriating the signs of masculinity, butch gender stretched the image of what it can mean to female born/female assigned. Similarly, femme women gave feminine signifiers new meaning” (Levitt et al 100). By orienting their sexuality toward a butch woman instead of a man, queer femmes placed lesbian desire in the public and challenged seemingly inherent notions of female sexuality.

Although femme/butch relationships appeared to be upholding heteronormativity, there was an important distinction between straight couples and femme/butch couples. Heterosexuality and traditional notions of gender were transformed and reimagined through femme/butch dynamics as femme characteristics were not considered inferior but were instead praised and granted respect and admiration (Levitt et al 100). Instead of being cast in the traditional feminine stereotype as weak or passive, femme became known to be anything but, femmes came to be seen as rebellious, 'untamed' women, as femmes intentionally took the risks of being seen publicly in the company of butch women and being caught in bar raids that could put both their employment and physical security in jeopardy. Femmes further transcended traditional expectations of femininity as they sometimes were made to financially support butch partners who had difficulty maintaining employment because of their gender-nonconforming, masculine appearance.

Another important distinction between heterosexual and femme/butch relationships involves sexual dynamics; sexuality within femme/butch relationships was not based upon or modeled after heterosexual sexuality (Levitt et al 100). In fact, sexuality functioned nearly opposite of heterosexual relationships; the primary focus was often on the femme partner's pleasure as it was not uncommon for their butch partners to be stone. Femme/butch was, in this way, a unique and erotic partnership "serving both as a conspicuous flag of rebellion and as an intimate exploration of women's sexuality" (Levitt et al 100).

Second wave feminism transformed femme/butch dynamics immensely. By the late 1960s as the Women's Liberation Movement was emerging, gender politics

witnessed a significant shift. Second wavers rejected patriarchal notions of gender and desired an escape from these constraints. Because femme/butch relationships were read as heteronormative and as problematic appropriations of gender under patriarchy, second-wavers rejected femme/butch relationships and gender expressions. Thus, there was a move towards androgyny in the community (Levitt et al 101). Butch lesbians were accused by feminists of reifying problematic constructions of masculinity and or attempting to adopt male privilege. Second-wavers accused femme women of upholding patriarchal constructions of femininity and ‘true womanhood’ and were thought to have been contributing to the patriarchal objectification of women. Lesbians and queer women who had identified with the femme/butch dichotomy were criticized by second wavers and many of them felt the pressure to conform to the new shift in gender politics. Nestle (1993) wrote that “we lesbians from the fifties made a mistake in the early seventies; we allowed our lives to be trivialized and reinterpreted by feminists who did not share our culture” (Levitt et al 101).

A decade later, by the early 80s, gender politics were shifting and queer folk began to reclaim femme and butch identities. However, as lesbians reclaimed femme and butch identities, the function of such identities developed new meanings and the motivations behind claiming these identities shifted. Claiming femme or butch roles no longer served as a mechanism of ‘passing’ or surviving in the straight world, so femme/butch became an act of self-identification during this time (Levitt et al 101) as they emerged into different social contexts.

Although femme/butch couplings had played a critical role in lesbian community

in the 1950s, more attention has always been focused on female masculinity and butch identity (Levitt et al 101). Femme identity has a history of being positioned solely as a complement or counterpart of butch identity and has often not been validated in the same way butch identity has. Responding to the lack of femmeness in queer discourse, femmes have begun organizing around femme issues and have spoken out against femme invisibility and femme-phobia. Femme activism has been enacted through fashion, art, zines and other DIY/social media, and both creative and academic writing. Beginning in the 1990s, a wave of queer femme writers had emerged and worked to place femme identity more centrally in queer discourse (see Pratt 1995, Harris & Crocker, 1997; Munt, 1998; Nestle, 1992; Newman, 1995). These writings discuss a diverse set of femme experiences alongside multiple and intersecting identities. Although the experience of being femme undoubtedly shifts across racial, ethnic, and class lines and is informed by gender, location, and body, within this collection of femme literature, common themes seem to have emerged. Some femme authors have defended queer femininity as it is an identity that is seen as less valid or even “looked down on—especially in a feminist political community” (Levitt et al 101) and attempted to differentiate queer femininity from normative, passive, or heterosexual femininity. Femme literature also resisted the belief that androgyny is the only way to challenge patriarchy. Repeatedly, femme authors asserted that femmes are no less queer (a task only relevant to femmes), and that their gender expression is as 'authentic' as butch gender expression and not simply an attempt to pass as straight.

It is the issue of visibility that problematizes an easy reading of fat queer femme

identity. When masculinity (or qualities like fatness, which for women are often viewed as masculinizing) is the only mode by which femme identities can be legibly “queer,” an ambivalence around visibility arises in the fat, queer femme subject. This ambivalence, in addition to the stigma associated with fatness and queerness (whether immediately visible or not) makes an entirely celebratory experience of the body impossible. In the next chapter, I will discuss the ways in which shame makes ambivalent fat, queer femmes’ relationships with their bodies.

Chapter II. Reflections on Fat, Femme Visibility and Shame

I was out one Saturday at Austin's biggest queer fundraiser of the year, sporting my half-sleeve tattoo of queer icon Frida Kahlo and several other markers of queer visibility I thought were necessary to claim a place for myself in that space when someone approached me and asked me if I was straight. I looked blankly at them, and asked, "If I was straight, why would I be here?" The woman responded with some offensive comment about liking her women "Hispanic" and the "thicker the better." This was not the first time my presence in a queer space was treated with suspicion, or the first occasion I was racially exoticized and/or fat-fetishized in a supposedly radically queer space. I focus on this occasion in particular because it does a good job of calling attention to the messy interplay of intersecting, marginalized social locations that make upsetting interactions like this possible. Because femmes are often the sounding board against which queerness is read, so that the less feminine one presents the more "queer" they supposedly are, my access to queer spaces is often questioned. And after I had to come out at the second-biggest annual queer event in Austin, my femininity, fatness, and race were made into sites of consumption. My femininity was first used to invalidate me as a queer subject, then implicitly to suggest that I should be grateful for these unwanted, offensive advances. My fat, Chicana visibility, in this occasion, didn't so much mark me as "queer" as they marked me the possessor and receiver of sexual and other appetites. This consumption and fetishization differs from the language of desirability I am trying to articulate for fat queer femmes because fetishization always hinges upon oppressive hierarchies (the colonialism in the word 'Hispanic,' the objectification of the word

“thick,” which is often how cuts of meat are described). Calling for a queer space more inclusive of diverse forms of embodiment, including fat femininity, means articulating a mode of desirability that is not dictated by objectification.

While my fatness is always visible by the nature of its deviance, the shame associated with the word “fat” keeps polite people from acknowledging my fatness, as if to do so would be an inherent source of shame for me. I remember one of the first times I “outed” myself as fat. It was my second year of college and I was at the mall with my best friend, Megan. As we walked throughout the mall, Megan would drag me into stores that most likely didn’t carry my size. As a size 16/18, I was/am too fat to fit into “normal” sizes. At each store, I was lucky to find a shirt or two that I could squeeze myself into. As our shopping trip continued, I grew more and more bored. We came across Forever 21 and as Megan walked towards the door, I stopped and told her I didn’t want to go. Knowing that I would be confined to the jewelry and purse sections while Megan combed the extensive and seemingly endless racks of poorly produced clothes, I told her that my reluctance was due to the fact that I wouldn’t be able to fit into their clothes because of their limited size options: small, medium, and large. She looked surprised at my comment. Megan, who is thin, wore their largest size. I was confused by the expression on her face. How could it have never occurred to her that if she was a Forever 21 size large, how could I, her fat best friend, possibly fit into any of their clothes? I said it again; “they don’t make clothes for fat girls. I can meet you somewhere if you want to go.” “You’re not fat!” she proclaimed quickly. I looked blankly at her and responded, “Yes, I am.” Megan hastily added that she didn’t see me as fat, and then the

conversation was over. This wasn't the first time I've heard this. My family, other friends, even lovers would tell me this as if I should be flattered or relieved, they said this as a compliment. But I wasn't flattered, I was confused. Because I am fat. I am not heavy or thick, or overweight, I'm fat and have been since I could remember. It has taken me a long time to be comfortable claiming this as part of my identity and it took even longer to speak the word, "fat" in relation to myself and my body. The legacy of violence associated with the word made it hard to reclaim an identity that is so often marked as abject. After hearing my best friend, and others, tell me that they didn't see me as fat, it was clear that they saw the negative connotations of fatness. To call someone fat is not just to stigmatize their body, but is also to stigmatize their whole person. But I *am* fat, and if others "do not see me as fat", it is because these connotations of fatness don't actually have anything to do with the actual physical embodiment of it. I want to challenge these preconceived notions of fatness.

As others continue to respond similarly and deny my fatness, I've become aware of the strange position of my in/visibility as a fat person. My fatness becomes invisible when my thin friends speak about my body in euphemisms, calling me curvy, thick, or voluptuous. My fatness becomes invisible when my thin friends talk about how so and so has gotten fat recently in front of me as if it's something gross and shameful. And my fatness is certainly invisible when Megan or other friends ask me "do I look fat in this?" My invisible fatness allows me to witness judgmental and shaming interactions between thin people. Because my friends "don't see me as fat," I am subject to their fat-talk although it's indirect and about me *explicitly*. This is similar to what I often experience in

straight spaces. Like my fat invisibility, I find my queerness to be invisible to those around me always. Because of this, I find myself in the strange position of having perceived, albeit false membership to a community (in this case, the straight community) that is not mine. My invisibility as a queer person affords me a glimpse into how straight folks interact with one another, especially in a space void of a visibly queer person. I have witnessed anti-queer and homophobic talk among straight folks. This puts me in a conflicted position: do I risk outing myself by challenging their hateful and hurtful comments in a space that has already been made unsafe? Or do I become complicit in their anti-queer behavior and words? This negotiation of space and safety is not unique to queer femme issues, but there is something different about how we are implicated in this process. Because my body is not readily or generally marked as queer, it is never the immediate target of anti-queer violence or harassment. But as a queer femme, I find myself having to consistently and very frequently navigate these types of situations; to survey the space and the people occupying it at that particular moment to determine if it is safe enough to out myself. In these situations, my queerness is thus marked through my voice, through my words, which presents a specific responsibility to call out and challenge these hurtful actions and words enacted in presumably straight spaces. I find that this responsibility often translates to my experiences of my Chicana hyper in/visibility. As a bi-racial, lighter skinned Chicana, I often find that in all/mostly white spaces, my Chicana identity is either hyper-visible—generally through the mode of exoticization—or hyper-invisible through the whitewashing of my brownness. In white spaces, most often in casual or social settings, I sometimes pass as white. This affords me

a similarly conflicted and strange position of having false membership to a community or space (in this case, a white space) that I don't necessarily or exclusively identify with. Thus I am able to witness interactions that a darker-skinned or more visible person of color might not.

One specific memory sticks out in my memory as I think about the way my light-brownness is treated in white spaces. In my last year of college, I ventured to a party at a neighbor's house down the street. My undergraduate university was public and 'diverse-ish' (60% of the student population was white, 40% were made up students of color) but largely segregated. I entered the party and quickly noticed that I was the only person of color there. This was not an unusual occurrence for me. While talking to others at the party, a group of white men began talking about their perceived decline of our university. "It just seems like our school has gone to shit now that they're letting all those urban kids from Chicago in," someone said. A few others nodded in agreement. Another commented on how "ghetto" the city had become since the influx of students from the city moving there. While the conversation grew more and more offensive, another white party-goer looked at me blankly; it was clear that to him, I was of color. The conversation continued for a few minutes. I was puzzled; I didn't know how to respond to what I was hearing. The guy who recognized my brownness continued to look at me, offended and seemingly also at a loss for words. We exchanged looks, but remained silent. I sensed that if I spoke up, the mood would quickly grow cold and uncomfortable, hostile even. I was nervous to challenge them, to speak about race and social location, especially as the only woman of color in a group of white men. But since he identified me as a person of color, although

most likely ambiguously and not necessarily as a member of the group that was made the scapegoat for our university's "decline," he looked at me expectantly. It was clear to me what he was thinking: if someone were to challenge the racism spewing out of these white mouths, it should be me, the lone person of color. I resented this responsibility placed upon me and his expectation of me to uphold that responsibility.

These interactions between fat, femme, and Chicana feel messy, complicated and are often hard to articulate. Like Bordo's argument that the falsity of the hierarchical mind/body dualism as a philosophical concept doesn't make it *feel* less real, the fact that I identify proudly as a fat, queer femme doesn't make the stigma and shame I experience as an individual inhabiting a body at the intersection of many marginalized identities any less harmful. In this chapter I will engage with Susan Fraiman's essay "Queer Theory and the Second Sex" to discuss queer theory's move towards a more masculine centered theoretical framework that marginalizes queer, femme-identified women, fat women, and people of color, who have historically been associated with the body in its "grossest" forms. I will then move to a discussion of fatphobia in queer theory and queer spaces, and my relation to both the pride and shame that come with being in/visible. The purpose of this section is to put a scholarly re-emphasis on the body, which is important to understanding how oppression operates on people in day-to-day life, and thus to finding forms of activism that are most suited to resistance. This autoethnographical move is one in a long legacy of feminist theorists, such as queer theorist Ann Cvetkovitch (*Depression: A Public Feeling*) and fat studies scholar April Herndon ("Disparate but Disabled: Fat Embodiment and Disability Studies").

In “Queer Theory and the Second Sex” Susan Fraiman articulates her ambivalent relationship with queer theory. She predicts that she will offend some of her readers by including a chapter on queer theory in her gendered critique of “cool men” because queer masculinities are already marginalized by traditional gender roles:

In what senses does a chapter on queer theory belong in a book about cool men? Aren’t gay men (not to mention lesbians) quintessentially uncool: precisely those subjects abjected by conventional masculinity, especially the ‘bad boy’ version of it in which boys will be boys, and gender is tautological? Well, yes. But my topic is not gay men so much as queer discourse that, while professing to destabilize gender, may still at times have recourse to normative views. (Fraiman 122).

It is clear in this passage and in others that Fraiman feels ambivalence about this move—not because she feels her claims to be untrue, but because they are problematized by her own relationship with queer theory. While she feels that it has been formative in her own journey to accessing radical politics, Fraiman believes that queer theory is often set up in a way that suggests it came into the academic scene as an amendment to feminist theory, to fill in its lack so to speak. Her intervention into queer discourse is one of reverent obligation, and she “take[s] up this critique...with a powerful appreciation for the importance of the work I am criticizing; indeed...I turn now to the area of scholarship with which I feel the strongest kinship” (Fraiman 126):

Queer theory has, of course, sponsored important work not only on women and lesbianism but also on femininity and femme-ness...Yet as long as there has been queer theory, there has also been a strain of internal as well as external feminist critique to the effect that, notwithstanding its claims to repudiate gender binaries, much of this discourse is secretly and sometimes quite frankly in love with masculinity. (Fraiman 123).

Fraiman is concerned with the ways that this move away from the body in queer theory further marginalizes identities and social locations that feminists have fought hard for, such as femme, lesbian (though my paper focuses on queer femme identities) and “mother.” She writes, “Just as the feminine is troped as biological destiny, so feminism is troped as a quasi-biologist belief system...when women occupy the place of ‘other’ within queer discourse it is frequently because they occupy the place of ‘mother’; and because ‘mother,’ in turn, is reduced to biology, heterosexuality, traditional family, coercive normativity” (Fraiman 129). This turn away from so-called biological essentialism (ie. the female body and the maternal caregiving it has come to represent) in queer theory has taken the “home” and the “family” off of its radar, along with a focus on the immediacy of women’s reproductive rights. Though I find aspects of Fraiman’s chapter troubling in what might be read as her conflation of transmasculinity with misogyny, I believe her critique of the male-centered trend in queer theory is critical.

However, this oppositional distancing of queerness from femininity extends beyond the academy, as the observation I discussed at the beginning of this chapter indicates. Though Fraiman makes a point of distinguishing between gay men and queer discourse in this chapter, I find the two to be hard to untangle. As an academic discipline that arguably arose from attention to the queer body (even if that body is male), it makes sense that empirical knowledge informs theoretical knowledge and visa versa. This supposed need to distinguish queerness from femininity (especially in terms of female-bodied femmes) feels very real and significant in my own queer community. I can’t begin to count the number of times I’ve heard a queer person sneer at the idea of having

children, or “settling down” in supposedly feminist spaces. As a queer anti-assimilationist I consider the Human Rights Campaign and its single-issue (same-sex marriage) politics to be an enemy of my queer community. I understand the desire and need, as a queer person, to separate oneself as far as possible from those narratives of “just like you” gay identities. However, I’m also suspicious of a queer politics that views domesticity and maternity inherently anti-queer or essentialist because I think it only makes the stigma attached to queer femme illegibility all the greater. I believe that this is fueled by the queer need for anti-assimilation, in short: “we don’t want to look anything like those ‘equality’ sell-outs.” In turn, femmes who don’t successfully navigate the sticky terrain of adopting highly stylized queer femme fashion fads, of maintaining queer visibility whilst remaining true to their femme-ness (something that never guarantees queer-recognition), are seen as gender-conforming and anti-queer. I resent not being immediately legible as queer in day-to-day interactions with straight people, but I resent more that my place in my community is often questioned, ridiculed and dismissed as regressive. If our understandings of queerness were more fluid and less rooted in a misogynistic idealization of masculinity, maybe I wouldn’t have such a hard time trying to make my queerness visible by standards that are still male-centered, like independence and toughness (Piepzna-Samarasinha, Miller).

Similarly, there are strains of queer theory that use “fat” as a rhetorical and theoretical device that is far removed from the language used to embrace and politicize fatness. This is a specific kind of betrayal to those of us who haven’t forgotten about the fact that queer theory, and queerness, used to be about interrogating stigmas against

bodies that don't fit into societal norms. Using fatness as metaphor without paying attention to the material lives of fat folks, something that would likely not be done with other social locations like "queerness", can perpetuate harmful and regressive politics that further marginalize fat folks. In "Two Girls, Fat and Thin" Lauren Berlant discusses fatness in relation to cruel attachments, and while she makes some powerful and useful claims, she also relies on rhetoric that I find harmful and problematic. She writes of the "fat girl" in Gaitskill's novel, "she has **hoarded her knowledge** and made her body into a **grotesque shield**. **Obesity** and **ugliness** create a force field around her, seeming to neutralize what, in those 'gatherings of the normally proportioned,' might come from others—curiosity or attachment" (Berlant 128, emphasis mine). This analysis appropriates the fat body as spectacle, as if by virtue of this character's overvisibility (LeBesco), Berlant feels entitled to making claims about the purposes fatness serves (for her book anyway). She positions fat as a form of psychological protection, which is in line with similar narratives of fatness as "a form of physical protection against sexual demands" (LeBesco 86). Berlant also tells us that "During Dorothy's early adolescence she gets quiet, fat, and disgusting, without knowing why. When I say 'disgusting,' I am not interpreting. Dorothy characterizes herself as 'gross and unhealthy'" (Berlant 131). I find this to be problematic for two reasons: firstly, Dorothy is a character, existing as a metaphor in Gaitskill's book as much as Berlant's. To use this dialogue as a validation for using harmful words like "disgusting," but even more so to blot out her use of epithets like "obesity," "ugliness" does not validate her language or body-shaming. Consider the image of the fat, "knowledge-hoarding" woman whose appetite has built her a "grotesque

shield” (128). Secondly, the shame that fat folks feel in relation to their bodies, intensified by fatphobic and anti-feminist narratives about the gross, baseness of fat, should be problematized rather than poeticized. As I will discuss later in the chapter, pride and shame cannot exist separately, and there is not yet enough scholarship documenting this relationship. For fat folks, this often looks like ambivalence about their bodies, a dance between pride and shame that leans more one way or the other depending on the circumstances.

Every time I pass a queer in the street and they don’t recognize me as part of their community, or every time some supposedly fat ally goes off on a fat-phobic rant about exercise, I feel ashamed. Part of this has to do with the “outing” that LeBesco says fat women have to do despite their overvisibility. This is another thing that fat folks have in common with queers, according to LeBesco who explains:

In an interesting study of ritual conversation among girls of all ages, Mimi Nichter claims that the phrase “I’m so fat” serves as a beacon of reassurance that indeed one is *not* fat. The expression signifies personal and cultural concerns, and functions as an idiom of distress, a call for support from peers, a defense mechanism that allows its speaker to reveal her weak spots before others can do so, and a bonding device. Unsurprisingly, girls who are truly fat don’t engage in such talk, because to do so would be to “out” them. (LeBesco 92).

If what LeBesco says about using reassurances of non-fatness as a bonding tool for women is correct, and I have felt the same to be true, then fat women seeking friendship with women who have internalized messages such as these are faced with an issue of visibility and how to form meaningful connections. How might we connect with other women on this shameful topic, when fat women are often asked to reassure their thinner friends their bodies are desirable by telling them they are *of course* not fat? These

interactions are shameful, and for fat women who don't feel in a place to question this rhetoric, they're one-sided. Shame offers distinct problems for making connections, or attachments, and without coming together meaningful connections between us, activist circles cannot last.

LeBesco also offers some useful connections between the shame that fat folks often feel, its relationship to femininity, and the stigma attached to queerness. She cites Ganapati Durgadas' argument that "The roundness and softness of fat men confirms their 'womanishness'—meaning 'you can be fucked, in more ways than one, within the patriarchal hierarchy as your relative male status is revoked'" (LeBesco 89). This quotation is significant because it shows the way that much of the stigma surrounding fatness overlaps with femininity. Fatness, like femininity, is often spoken of in terms of consumption. Le Besco writes, "a woman who is fat is doubly sexually deviant: she must be engaging in sex (eating) for her own pleasure and she presumably displays a voracious appetite" (LeBesco 87). I believe that this conflation of femininity, fatness, and queerness with animality and hypersexuality, as we discussed in Chapter I, has a lot to do with stigma associated with excess of physical pleasure. The bodily nature of eating and having sex are relegated to the "body" side of the mind/body dualism. No matter how good these things feel they at times feel equally bad due to the stigma associated with them.

While I find Berlant's fat vocabulary to be unproductive, I think her theories of attachment can be useful in thinking about fat, queer, femme ambivalences about the body. Particularly her theory of cruel optimism might give us some insight into the

complexity of making connections/attachments to people based on a shared identity. Berlant explains cruel attachments as “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic” (Berlant 24). For Berlant, no attachment or sense of affiliation is complete, because they all rely on the work of hopeful fantasy to fill in the gaps where there is not unity between subjects (Berlant 24). In the relation to the fat-talk that LeBesco said “outs” fat women because their non-fat friends cannot reassure them of their desirability, this might look like a fat woman’s desire to lose weight, and take part in that reaffirming process. However, since the weight loss industry is largely unfounded and unsuccessful, this produces more shame. This is what I would call a cruel attachment, because though I can see how ill founded and oppressive fat talk is, the shame that comes from being “outed” by this talk still hurts. It is a cruel attachment because though I know femme spaces of connection that rely on body-shaming rely on exclusionary language are oppressive I in some ways still hold onto the false promise of meaningful interpersonal connections.

Berlant also pays attention to the ways in which eating can serve as a mode of resistance for Justine, though she is careful not to misrecognize this as agency. She writes about her eating, “Justine’s mode of survival involves generating a pleasure in the world-situated gesture” (137). In this way, the repetitive act of consumption serves as her “self-care” in a world bent on squashing pleasure in the name of productivity. In this way the girls in the novel are able to orient their relationship to the space external to them, which also shapes their internal space, both girls “pulling the world in and pushing it away

according to their own terms and sense of pacing” (Berlant 138). Though I am wary of the way in which Berlant goes about making this claim, it is central to thinking about the way that shame constructs identity through interiority/exteriority (Sedgwick 36).

In Sedgwick’s influential chapter “Shame, Theatricality, Queer Performativity” she explains how central shame is to the construction of identity. She writes, “Shame floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication” (Sedgwick 36). The oddity of shame rests in its ability to both “individuate” and bring one into messy relation with another (36). Like it or not, shameful interactions are how we learn about the impossibility and inescapability of attachments. Sedgwick explains:

In interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity. In fact, shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating. One of the strangest features of shame, but perhaps also the one that offers the most conceptual leverage for political projects, is the way the bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment *by* someone else, someone else’s embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell, or strange behavior, seemingly having nothing to do with me, can so readily flood me—assuming I’m a shame-prone person—with this sensation whose very suffusiveness seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable. (Sedgwick 36-7).

Important to understanding who one is and where one belongs is figuring out where one doesn’t belong. The moment LeBesco refers to when a woman says to her friends, “I’m so fat” is one that is concerned with drawing individuating and communal “outlines.” It requires her to first shamefully identify with fatness, then seek refuge from this shame by the reassurance that she belongs in a less-shameful relation with other non-fat women. Her moment of release from shame is marked by another’s shame at not being granted

the same release and acceptance into this community. The individuating shame is still felt by the non-fat women, though, as they both identify and disidentify with the shame of fatness. Bordo writes that “through routine, habitual activity, our bodies learn what is ‘inner’ and what is ‘outer,’ which gestures are forbidden and which required, how violable or inviolable are the boundaries of our bodies, how much space around the body can be claimed, and so on” (Bordo 16). What happens when shame is the vehicle through which we learn about the boundaries of our bodies? Fat bodies necessarily exceed the “boundaries” they are told by society they must inhabit. Many seats don’t fit, stalls aren’t comfortable, clothes are miserable to find. How can we acknowledge, validate, and utilize this shame in a way that isn’t politically self-defeating? In the final chapter I will discuss theories of shame-centered activism that I believe are moving towards more inclusive and productive forms of resistance.

Conclusion: Theorizing Body-Centered Activisms

“We live a life of spreading the word on the beautiful word of big. We have the bevy of fat girl fans that follow our wide loads, and so we assumed that everyone’s experience was relatively similar. What we forgot about in the sugar-hazed frenzy that brought us together, was the bad days. When nothing fits, including the chairs, and the most comfortable place to be is in bed.”

Fireweed Collective (LeBesco 96)

What might a form of activism that pays attention to the ambivalences of pride and shame look like? Surely when shame is such a big part of accessing a marginalized identity any activist community that operates on a “pride only” basis can’t do justice to the complexity of oppression. LeBesco writes about the Fireweed Collective quotation above, “A fat politics that fails to recognize the depressing aspects of oppression, and instead focuses on only the ‘positive’ is doomed to fail” (LeBesco 96). If we are to move towards a more extensive understanding and deconstruction of oppression we must pay attention to all affects—especially the bad ones.

Heather Love has similar things to say about the negative emotions associated with queerness. In *Feeling Backward* she talks about the way that queer studies and the LGBT movement have created a story of liberation from shame to pride that isn’t true to the experiences of internalized homophobia and shame. She argues that the negative “backward” portrayals of LGBT folks that have been written off as unenlightened are still useful in making sense of the ambivalence of shame and pride in LGBT folks today because “the history of queer damage retains its capacity to do harm in the present” (Love 9):

Same-sex desire is not as impossible as it used to be; as a result, the survival of feelings such as shame, isolation, and self-hatred into the post-Stonewall era is often the occasion for further feelings of shame. The embarrassment of owning such feelings, out of place as they are in a movement that takes pride as its watchword, is acute. It is also hard to see how feelings like bitterness or self-hatred might contribute to any recognizable political praxis...At odds with the wishful thinking that characterizes political criticism, they are held accountable for the realities that they represent and often end up being branded as internally homophobic, retrograde, or too depressing to be of use. These texts do have a lot to tell us, though: they describe what it is like to bear a “disqualified” identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury—not fixing it. (Love 4).

What could an commitment to “living with injury” rather than “fixing it look like in fat, queer femme activisms? For some fat activists like LeBesco, the responsibility put on fat women in the media to be body-positive at all times is unfair and unproductive. She explains that these women are often placed in one of three categories “vis-à-vis their fatness”: “(1) Out and About; (2) Silent Types; (3) Traitors” (LeBesco 92). These labels mean just how they sound. “Out-and-Abouts” are body-positive fat activists. They wear their fat identity on their sleeves proudly, never ashamed to be the fat spokesperson (92). “Silent types” are fat folks who inhabit a fat subject position in the media but remain quiet about their fatness. This means that they generally refrain from engaging in either body-positive or negative-fat talk (93). “Traitors” are fat women who become agents of the weight loss industry, who engage in negative-fat talk and diet-pushing rhetoric. However, what these three categories assume is that they are all static identities and affective stances. It’s unreasonable to expect one’s experience of their own stigmatized fatness to be straightforward and fixed. LeBesco similarly takes issue with these categories that reduce the experience of fatness and stigma to one either wholly positive or negative.

The shame/pride dichotomy is another example of a one of the false dualisms Bordo critiques. Bordo explains that the mind/body dualism is not so easy to escape in everyday life. She claims, “one often hears intellectuals urging that we ‘go beyond’ dualisms, calling for the deconstruction of the hierarchal oppositions (male/female, mind/body, active/passive) that structure dualisms in the West, and scorning others for engaging in ‘dualistic thinking.’ But it is not so easy to ‘go beyond dualism’ in this culture” (Bordo 15). This is similar to the way that butch/femme presentation is often shamed as regressive imitations of heterosexuality. I argue that engaging with theory alone is not enough to empower fat, queer femmes. The gaps between theoretical understanding and actual experience are too wide, and need to be supplemented by activism that is body and feeling centered.

To argue for activism that is more body and feeling-centered though is to argue that there is a place to discuss/employ shame that is useful in some way, even if it’s only use is to validate the nuanced experiences of fat, queer femmes. Heather Love talks about the need for us to acknowledge the negative affects associated with queerness. Love says:

We need a genealogy of queer affect that does not overlook the negative, shameful, and difficult feelings that have been so central to queer existence in the last century. We have been used to thinking of such affects as pure waste, the inevitable by-products of our historical tough luck. But as long as homophobia continues to structure our public and private lives, and books like *The Well* continue to be so eerily familiar, we cannot do without an analysis of the intimate effects of homophobia. Although it is painful to recognize our continuity with figures like Stephen Gordon, it is through such shaming acts of identification that we can come to terms with the difficulty of queer history and with its legacy in the present. Such a reckoning is necessary, for without it we cannot remember history’s failures, or do justice to our own experience in the present. Celebration will only get us so far, for pride itself can be toxic when it is sealed off from the shame that nurtured it.

(Love 127).

Though in one way this move makes perfect sense, in another Love is writing against a legacy of queer theory (and LGBT activism) that has taken “pride as its watchword” (Love 4) and aligned progress with a move away from stigma. A good example of this might be the mainstream LGBT movement’s insistence that “gayness” is biological or caused by a “gay gene.” The idea is that no one would willingly bear the stigma of queerness if they had the choice (a biological imperative LeBesco tells us is often waged against fat and queer people) (LeBesco 85). Queer theorists rightly responded to this with a critique of the mentality that dictates that queer lives are somehow less valuable and more tragic. However, this has kept us from examining experiences of the burden of stigma when it at times feels too much to bear. The LGBT and fat acceptance movements’ foci on pride place the pressure to “change” on the stigmatized body rather than on society which tells us it is the work of each individual fat, queer, and/or femme to move from shame to pride in terms of their relationship to their deviance, not the responsibility of oppressive social structures to change. While pride and body acceptance have been key components to the survival of so many stigmatized individuals, a failure to acknowledge the shame that goes hand in hand with that pride does an injustice to individual and shared histories of oppression.

Barry D. Adam engages with this problem in his addition to the *Gay Shame* anthology, “How Might We Create a Collectivity That We Would Want to Belong To?” He takes issue with the way that “the marketplace” has taken over gay pride events. When he talks about “gay shame” he means a shame of a movement that was co-opted by

the most privileged of the LGBT. For him, activism that does a productive job is activism that acknowledges this shame. He explains:

The allure of the gay-shame idea, if indeed it is very attractive at all, may be its connection to a long-standing ambivalence toward having a marked identity. Hardly anyone outside the charmed circle of unmarked noncategories inhabited by those who can think of themselves as ‘just people’ without a modifying adjective can fail to wish at times to be able to shrug off a particular ‘limiting’ category. (Adam 305).

The kind of shame that Adam is talking about, shame of a movement that has been corrupted by capitalism, goes hand in hand with the kinds of shame experienced by queer, fat femmes. Because mainstream “LGBT Pride” factions privilege bodies who can most easily pass as “normal,” fat folks and queers are already marginalized. On the other hand, the shaming that femmes often receive in the queer community comes from the fact that their queerness is not as easily legible, and is often mistaken for mainstream lesbian presentation and assimilationist politics. Thus the shame a femme feels for her lack of visibility is made worse by her assumed investment in assimilationist politics.

Adams is nervous of the way that calling for a politics under the umbrella of “gay shame” assumes a universal subject or that experiences of shame are cohesive amongst all gays and lesbians. He writes, “Despite the apparent attractiveness of shame as an antidote to the pretense and commercialism of pride, the pursuit of shame as an alternative to pride has pitfalls of its own. It slides toward postulating a new universal subject, as if shame were the fundamental experience of all LGBT people” (Adams 304). However, what I think the umbrella of “gay shame” might offer a political movement centered around pride and assimilation is attention to the specific needs of the more marginalized in our LGBT communities.

One example of femme activism that responds to these intersections and complexities are the Femme Sharks. The Femme Shark Communiqué #1, a zine created by the Femme Sharks – a movement of femmes of color, illustrates the unique ways in which femmes of color understand, construct, and perform femmeness in political terms unique to their identities and experiences. They seek to “reclaim the power of femmes as fierce, tough, hungry girls who are the leaders and defenders of [their] communities” but reject a femmeness that centers on whiteness and neglects to challenge oppression in all its forms. They also acknowledge that femmes live in “many kinds of bodies,” and that femme itself is as complicated and heterogeneous as all those who identify with/as it. The Femme Sharks’ intersectional approach to femmeness reflects the ways in which “[s]cholarship by feminists of color and queers of color emphasizes that interconnections among sexuality, race, class, gender, nation and imperialism transform each category, necessitating new modes of theoretical engagement” (qtd. in Ferguson 111).

Albeit in different ways, the majority of femmes represented in this zine emphasize the distinction between traditional femininity and queer femmeness. They argue that queer femmeness seeks not to ape traditional femininity but rather to reclaim it, reimagine it, and rework it in ways that have radical implications. For example, in a YouTube response to questions asked on their blog, femmes Jess and Majestic provide their own definitions of a powerful femmeness. Majestic says, “For me, femme is an identity politic, I guess. Anybody can be a femme... For me it just means, like, reclaiming or using femininity in ways that you find personally empowering or political.” Majestic’s definition of femininity reflects Judith Butler argument regarding the

performance of gender in “The Question of Social Transformation.” Butler says, “One surely cites norms that already exist, but these norms can be significantly deterritorialized through the citation. They can also be exposed as non-natural and nonnecessary when they take place in a context and through a form of embodying that defies normative expectation...” (218). Though in Butler’s formulation of resistance to gender norms it might be said that femme identities cannot be “deterritorialized” because their presentation doesn’t necessarily “defy normative expectation,” I believe the block-quotation from Bevin’s podcast discussed in the introduction of this report suggests otherwise. In it, Bevin spoke of always being “overdressed,” saying, “when I look in the mirror and smile because I’m wearing a glittery necklace, feathers in my hair, lots of cleavage, that’s what matters” (Bevin). In this way “femme” is not simply a regurgitation of age-old gender norms, but a revision of them and a reclamation of a subject position historically used to denigrate and shame those stigmatized individuals associated with the body, especially when its for one’s own viewing pleasure. The glitter and feathers she mentions are deliciously performative in their excess. Through intentional stylings and lots of (glittery) homage paid to the principle of excess, traditional roles of femininity can be revised through performance.

In the epilogue of *Feeling Backward* Love notes:

“The question really is not whether feelings such as grief, regret, and despair have a place in transformative politics: it would in fact be impossible to imagine transformative politics without these feelings. Nor is the question that faces us how to cultivate hope in the face of despair, since such calls tend to demand the replacement of despair with hope. Rather, the question that faces us is how to make the future backward enough that even the most reluctant among us might want to live there” (Love 163).

In my estimation, moving towards this sort of “backward future” means drawing attention to the ways in which shame and other negative affects still structure the lives of stigmatized individuals today. As I have shown in this report, because the mind/body dualism in Western culture denigrates the body, and associates femininity, queerness and fatness to be all bearers of its weight (Bordo 5), the most appropriate forms of activism are body centered. For me, this looks something like Femme Shark’s attention to their revisions of traditional roles of femininity that draw upon other, intersecting legacies of racial and sexual oppression in conjunction with Adam’s willingness to openly shame and feel shame of his own activist community. The first step towards more inclusive circles of activism is to begin imagining them.

We need an activist community that will hold onto its shame without giving way to pride. A community that will fight for the issues of its most marginalized: the HIV positive, fat, disabled, homeless, trans, people of color, instead of turning its head away in shame. A community that will come together to feel shame for its shortcomings as a radical collective, and then use that critique to move towards improving itself as a community, a space that allows one to grow tired, depressed, and hopeless when resilience is no longer an option. A community that will honor its matriarchs, never run from feminization, and always remember that reproductive justice goes hand in hand with sexual autonomy. We need an activist community that acknowledges the lies and oppression perpetuated by the weight-loss industry, but doesn’t label any one a “Traitor” for wanting to lose weight when it feels too hard to move sometimes in this world made for thin people. It’s not until we can escape the pride flag-waving mantle of

assimilationist politics that we can begin to do justice to the way oppression operates on our lives, producing ambivalence and shame in our stigmatized bodies. Doing this can re-center queer and fat politics around issues affecting the immediacy of our lives, health and happiness, and “the shame/pride binary can be just an opener for a much more complex conversation over what kind of LGBT communities we would want to live in, what they would ‘deliver,’ and how they might better provide support and care” (Adam 310).

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